

Research Article

THAI UNIVERSITY STUDENTS AND SOCIAL MEDIA: USING SOCIAL MEDIA TO EXPRESS AND LEARN ABOUT POLITICAL AND EDUCATIONAL TOPICS

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Abstract

This study investigates the popularity of social media in relation to learning and power, specifically in the areas of education and politics in Thai university students. This mixed-methods study shows that the majority of the 96 Thai students from Naresuan University surveyed do in fact post, comment, learn, and acquire both knowledge and allegiances based on what they see and read online. Students indicated a variety of social media behaviors and knowledge sharing that is important to consider in how and when students are learning. Descriptive surveys were used to find patterns and semi-structured interviews were utilized to gain a deeper understanding of results. This mixed-method study depicts how Thai students are using social media to discuss and learn about political and education topics.

Keywords: Social Learning, Education, Political Expression, Power

Introduction

Thailand has just experienced a chaotic event in their election of Prime Minister. Trucks are loud on the streets with political messages, TV is full of appearances by candidates, and students at universities are talking about and considering their futures. However, even more attention to the upcoming election is experienced online, via various social media sites. Chadwick and Stromer-Galley (2016) conducted a study about political themes and digital media and suggested that “The role of digital media practices in reshaping political parties and election campaigns is driven by a tension between

control and interactivity, but the overall outcome for the party organizational form is highly uncertain (p. 284). This is crucial in Thailand, specifically for university students who want to see a better Thailand and cannot voice concerns publically but can play a political game of power online using their social media skills. Furthermore, Haberkorn (2018) said that “The repression they faced suggests unsettling questions about the future of freedom of expression and political life in the polity when law operates in a sustained arbitrary fashion or is disregarded altogether” (p. 936). According to Long (2001, p. 10) “Development is a progressive movement towards technologically and institutionally more complex and integrated forms of modern society.” Some students are protesting various parties online, others are sharing stories to either support or dismiss certain officials, and many students have embraced social media as their platform of power, and if they have a high level of media literacy, can display that power proudly.

Significance of the Study

This study is significant to Thailand, and specifically to Thai university students who are probably voting and being involved politically for the first time. Thai students at universities have been seen using social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and IG at consistent levels and there is reason to explore how that use is affecting political and school related topics. For example, according to Constine (2017) there are over 21 million Facebook users in Thailand alone. The power of social media has perhaps transformed how students are learning various bits of information. In a study about the emergence of learning in Thailand, Ngampornchai and Adams (2016) stated that “Thai students tend to accept e-learning prudently” (p. 34). Learning is also a form of power, and this power was seen a few years ago when Schaffar (2016) studied the influence of Facebook on political unrest in Thailand. Students may be using popular social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram to discuss education, family, relationships, and other social situations because they may fear face-to-face confrontation, but on social media, they can say or post anything from the perceived safety of their room. Thomas (2018) discussed that motivation and academic performance may be linked with the obsession with social media and noted that Thailand ranks 8th in the world in Facebook use in particular (as cited in Leesa-Nguansak, 2018).

Research Question

How have social media platforms presented Thai University students with the opportunity to express opinions and have discussions about school and politics?

Project Description

This paper explores how current Thai university students affect and are affected by their social media posts in terms of politics and education. According to Deveney (2005) “Thai students were considered by their teachers to be friendly, non-aggressive, accepting, respectful, tolerant, team players, non-confrontational and positive” (p. 158). In his study how Thai students communicate and how Thai culture may affect the lives of students, it became evident that the general consensus according to his literature is that Thai students do not want confront others or put themselves in aggressive situations. This is a major premise of this paper, that is, that Thai students have become reliant on using social media to overcome their cultural barrier as well as expressing their opinions, both positive and negative about two very important things at this time, the right of individual power to enjoy the benefits of cultural freedom and political rights such as freedom of thought, freedom of opinion and expression, and participation in public affairs and elections. Though there are rules and laws surrounding media, many of these students ignore, or find a way around such things by the use of media literacy skills. It is estimated that more than 600 persons have been arrested during the last five years. These include pro-democracy young activists who criticized the junta government and have been prosecuted under the sedition law and the Computer-related Crime Act (CCA) (World Report 2019: Thailand/Human Right, 2019).

Literature Review

Social Media as Platform Concepts and Theory

This paper combines aspects of two salient theories; Selective Exposure Theory and Uses and Gratifications Theory. Each aforementioned theory has some relevance to this work, but there are gaps in both the literature and the concepts which will be elucidated upon commencement (see results section). Valkenburg et al. (2016) conducted a study about prevailing media theories, and in their work, they also see these two theories as a juxtaposition about current media concepts, they state on page 320:

Both the uses-and-gratifications and selective exposure theory postulates that individuals select media in response to their needs or desires and that a variety of psychological and social factors guide and filter this selection. Both theories also propose that media use is a precursor to consequences (named obtained gratifications in uses-and-gratifications theory and media effects in selective exposure theory).

One gap in the literature is seen here, when the authors point out that media use may be a catalyst for some sort of consequence, which is accurate, however, the consequences may be very subtle or subliminal such as social learning, or lack of learning within a post or comment. In order to close this gap, this research will explore and explain how social media itself is the platform and opportunity to set forth a sequence of opinions and events. The catalyst for some Thai students may be opinion or perceived knowledge, and they post their emotion or opinion on social media hoping for support or acceptance. This may start some sort of political or educational chain reaction. According to two of these authors previously (Valkenburg & Peter, 2013) there are three salient factors that take place when selecting and utilizing media which are “dispositional, developmental, and social context factors.” While these three factors are indeed relevant, the gap in literature is apparent. Dispositional factors may be seen as emotional or reactionary, and can be categorized as basic (sex, age, job). Developmental focuses on “like” generations or interests, that is, that a media producer or consumer tends to give more attention to media within his or her own scope of time or interest. The third factor, which is social, covers the biggest scope and can and does encompass social identity, meaning that people are using media for some sort of personal or social positioning. These are all important factors, however, the element of social learning that comes with identity forming. When students specifically are posting or consuming social media for example, and they post something, just as uses and gratifications suggests, they post for a reason, the reaction of consumers and then the reaction of the originator has all displayed power in what they have seen, done, learned, ignored, appreciated, or detested. There are a plethora of power theories and definitions, and both uses-and-gratifications and selective exposure theory offer elements of social learning that take place thanks to media, but do not fully address it as is relevant today with the intensity of social media. This study utilizes these two theories as a guide, and then closes the gaps in the literature review to find out how relevant and influential social media is when it comes to political events and educational discourse.

The major concepts of uses-and-gratifications theory and selective-exposure theory are important to consider and guide this paper, however, the inclusion of learning must be addressed in reference to social media (specifically IG, Facebook, and Twitter). This conceptual framework displays the relationship. Social learning becomes the center of the social media theme because students may be learning from one another instead of proven, validated sources about politics and school topics (i.e. teachers, students, assignments, events):

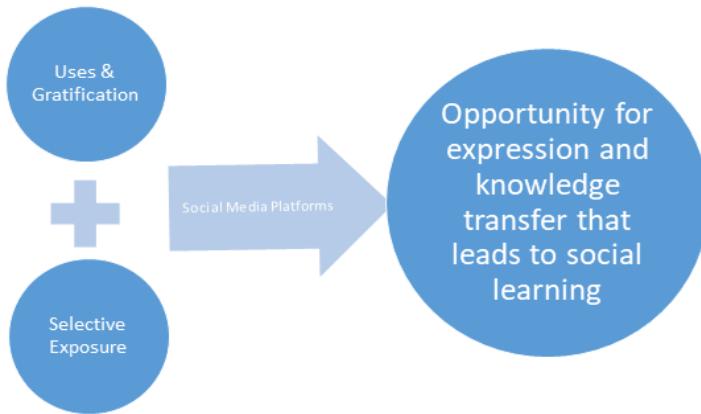


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

Social Media as a Platform of Social Learning

According to various research, social media has become a platform of social learning. Chun and Lee (2017) stated clearly that according to their work, “that individuals’ perceived sense of power serves as an underlying mechanism that accounts for why people share their opinions in a social media setting” (p. 120). Students in 2019 have embraced the potential communicative power of social media. In a recent study by Freelon et al. (2018), they posit that “Social media (broadly defined) have become essential tools for 21st-century social movements (p. 991). They go on to say that “All successful social movements must exercise power to help bring about their chosen social goals. Movements have traditionally done so by a number of means, including protests, petitions, and directly lobbying politicians (p. 991). The literature clearly identifies social media as a place where people (students) can post things in a less confrontational manner than between other people live. Additionally, they elucidate on the importance and role of media power when they suggest “Media power is especially important for connective movements. The assumption that shifts in discourse may eventually lead to broader social changes underlies every social movement’s communication efforts” (p. 992). These researchers also discuss elements of learning and support, such as unity, and how media power can and does create a sense of unity which becomes powerful when utilized for a common goal, and in this sense, of social learning, the goal is to gain some perception of learning.

According to White (2018), “Social networking applications have changed how people communicate” (p. 1). His study about how Thai students are using social media is a prime example of how Thai students currently share and acquire knowledge. As mentioned earlier, in Deveney’s (2005, p. 156) study about Thai student culture, he mentioned that there is a hesitation to speak out publicly

against politics or education. On page 169, Deveney concludes his paper by reminding readers that students do respect and admire teachers for the most part, and it would be rare to confront one directly. This is where the power of social media comes into play within the realm of education and politics. Students can utilize their social media as a means of expression, and that expression can become learning, which in essence is a source of authority or power. There was a study conducted in Italy years ago about the same phenomena, people using social media to discuss political matters because it was unusual and risky to discuss in public conversations. Ceron et al. (2013) suggested that “exponential growth of social media and social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter raises the possibility of using the web to explore and track the (political) preferences of citizens” (p. 342). Considering that this was a growing trend over 5 years ago, and the authors predicted the trend would continue to rise, which it has here in Thailand.

In 2016, Sherman et al. conducted a study where they found that the “present study highlights a new and unique way in which peer influence occurs on social media” (p. 1031). In reference to Thai students posting and commenting on educational and political topics, these authors stated that “Adolescence is a period during which self-presentation is particularly important, including on social media; thus, this significantly greater effect may reflect the relative importance of self-presentation” (p. 1033). Thai students may feel that social media is the most acceptable way to promote their own beliefs and knowledge to their peers. There is no direct research in this regard until this study.

Social Media Use in Thailand

There was a study done regarding the use of social media and behaviors in Thailand by Liengpradit et al. (2014), particularly among friends. These authors suggest that “Studies on human behavior will show that individual behavior is always impacted by their friend’s behavior both directly and indirectly at different degrees” (p. 70) and also that “emerging adults are likely to give valuable opinions” (p. 70). This behavior and trust amongst each other may also lead to political and school-related topics where friends may try to curry favor from one another. The authors also point out that social media friends are using social media more often and expressing more opinions. A more recent study in 2015 investigated the social media use of Thai students. Magpanthong and McDaniel (2015) found that Thai students use social media to have a feeling of closeness with others and achieve higher social status by having more friends. The need to communicate and desire to share with other friends their opinions was paramount. They state clearly that “Thai respondents were more likely to use Facebook postings as a means of relieving their frustrations” (p. 90). This is an emotion they may not be

able to express to teachers or politicians directly for example, but on social media they have a different level of confidence. It is clear that as the internet and tech devices become more available, Thai students will continue to use social media as a form of entertainment, communication, and possibly, power and learning.

Gap of the Literature

There are many articles and books about Thai students being engaged in social media. There are also a great deal of work done about Thai culture and traditions, regarding confidence and self-esteem. There is however, a large gap of literature that does not discuss two very salient topics that are in the lives of these Thai students almost daily, which are political events and school-related topics. Many Thai students today are experiencing a lot of cultural and governmental changes due to political changes, and many students may be experiencing pressure or frustration in their classes or with peers. These topics should be explored. Uses and Gratifications Theory and Selective Exposure Theory help explain why students may be using social media beyond simple entertainment, however there is a dearth of research regarding politics and education.

Methodology

This research aims to discover whether or not university students are using social media to express political and educational topics and how that perceived use may be resulting in social learning or media power.

Participants & Sampling

The population for this study was Naresuan University. Only English Program students were included (because the questions were in English). For the description survey I considered Yamane's Formula using 10% margin of error which indicated 91 students (972 English Program students at Naresuan University found from personal communication from NU staff) and I ended up with 96 surveys. These participants were found by snowball sampling. Interviews were conducted from random snowball sampling again, with the same technique as the surveys. Each student was an undergrad student in an English language program at Naresuan University.

Instruments

Google surveys was used because it calculates descriptive patterns and provides simple and clear results. An interview protocol was utilized to get answers from participants in form of Facebook

chat. The 8 interviews (8 because data became saturated at 8) were semi-structured in nature and took place online using FB chat so the conversations were transcribed for accuracy.

Data Collection

The survey was distributed before, during, and after the most recent Thai elections, and at the end of the school year for most universities. Each survey was calculated automatically by Google Surveys. This survey was descriptive in nature and did not require SPSS or a complex analysis system, instead nominal data was used to find patterns. The interviews were then conducted to get the “how” behind the numbers from surveys. Questions were designed based on the two aforementioned theories and concepts missing from the literature review. All participants were kept anonymous and were chosen at random by the previous participant. I selected the first participant for survey and interview randomly during a class held by a colleague of mine, and snowball sampling was used to get the rest of the participants. I stopped at 96 survey participants because the data had become saturated at that point. The interviews helped clarify and solidify survey results.

Data Analysis

The survey was designed to and did find out about social media use in relation to political and school related topics. This was adopted ultimately to discover and identify patterns. This gave me information about social media use and habits regarding school and political topics. Next, conversation analysis was used to answer the research question more completely. A coding chart was used that had keywords and themes that emerged from interviews. For example, when a student said that he or she trusted Twitter because there was less fear of consequence, and then another student said something similar, then that became a salient code.

Results

Survey Results

77% of respondents said that they learn or acquire their opinions from social media posts and comments. Roughly 85% of students who took this survey indicated that they do utilize Twitter, IG, or Facebook to promote or discuss political or educational topics. More importantly, about. That number shows the power of social media on the quality living of students. These students are seeing and reading social media posts, believing, and following what they see and hear. 70% of students are posting things to get acceptance (a “like” or comment) from their school or political post. Therefore, students are not only learning from social media, they are posting on social media for a direct reason, to gain power or to self-promotion. Furthermore, they may be doing so because according to this study, over 70% of

the students feel they have a high level of media literacy in presenting their information and their ideology. In fact, 70% of students indicated that they do get a feeling of power when they post something educational or political, which certainly is balanced with their perceived knowledge of using social media. Finally, and most telling, is that 87% of participants admitted that they have learned and acquired knowledge or behavior solely from social media. The following chart illustrates these statistics.

Table 1 Percentage of social media postings

Percentage of students admit to acquiring their opinion from social media	77%
Percentage of students that use social media to discuss political/educational topics	85%
Percentage of students who want attention from their political/education posts	70%
Percentage of students who feel they have a high level of media literacy	70%
Percentage of students who feel a sense a power when they post	70%

There is a clear indication of power coming from social media. The following chart depicts some of more decisive results of survey questions.

Table 2 Survey Results

	Often/Yes	Rarely/No
How often do you use FB or IG to express political opinions?	38%	32%
Do you post or share comments about laws or politics?	55%	45%
Do you use FB or IG to express opinion about teachers or your school?	58%	42%
Do you read about or talk about political or educational topics on IG or Facebook?	79%	21%
Do you use social media to learn and make decisions about politics or education?	78%	22%
Has reading or seeing posts on Facebook, IG, or Twitter influenced your behavior?	87%	13%

Interview Results

After the researchers found common themes and strong responses from surveys, interviews tied the study together. The interviews supported the survey responses and added the “how” and “why.” According to all eight students, social media is easier to use because their perception is that they can feel safer behind their phone or computer. The majority of students also indicated that they do use

FB and IG to discuss teachers and assignments because they cannot say these things directly to the teacher, so these platforms give them a voice. Social media gives them an opportunity to communicate in a perceived safe place.

The interviews provided depth and clarity to the surveys. One female student answered my question about why she posts about political or educational events, and she responded by saying that “I complain something, they might give some comments that show if they agree or disagree” (personal communication, May 23, 2019). She went on to discuss how she has posted to feel a sense of power, and that various posts related to politics or education have given her that sensation, where she felt a feeling of authority or acceptance. She also confirmed that she does post photos or comments with the sole purpose of feeling accepted, which for her, is power. Furthermore, another university student suggested that posting these events is like a secret power, where you have the safety of being behind a computer or phone, and you can even have multiple identities online to express what you want to say. More responses indicate the same that students are indeed using social media to express ideas and share knowledge, which many have confirmed as a source of power.

Conclusion

There is a great deal of research indicating that students are immersed in social media. In Thailand however, social media has become an apparent outlet for personal opinions and voices, and this platform of knowledge has become a source and outlet of power. Students are following each other and learning from each other. The most recent political election has many elements of complexity and being able to learn and experience the election through the minds of Thai students allows students to share, explore, and discuss the events that will influence their lives. The same goes for posts and comments regarding school related topics. A student may not wish to confront a teacher about a bad grade; however, they may be quick to post something clearly related to the matter on their social media site. This study is the first step in acknowledging that students do in fact use social media to communicate specific messages, next, more research needs to be done to find out more detail in why they feel social media has become their chosen platform, and more importantly, how much power comes with this platform.

Discussion and Suggestions

There are many courses students may be able to take that deal with social media or power. For example, Media Literacy is a common course for many universities where students can examine and

discuss how media works and how students engage in media. There is also a great deal of time spent on social media, and as such, students are already quite experienced and practiced with many facets of social media. However, there needs to be more research conducted in how much knowledge and power (power as in information, authority, and media literacy power) is being expressed by these students. In the survey, another question asked students if they often post something simply to get a high number of “likes,” and the majority said yes. Students realize that social media has become their platform in which to vocalize opinions behind the safety of their phone or tablet, and now, it is important for students to know how much power is gained or loss from their social media use. As Thailand continues to grow and find more social media opportunities, it seems plausible that students will continue to use and learn, and change based on the posts and comments of their friends.

In summary, based on current literature and on the results of this study, many Thai university students have adopted social media as their opportunity to express their feelings and perceptions regarding sensitive political matters and their daily experiences with teachers, staff, curriculum, and classmates. They perceive social media as “safer” and can control their speech and comments more confidently and articulately using social media rather than during face-to-face interactions. This may have both positive and negative effects (i.e. public speaking, posting something that would be permanent, potential legal concerns, and relationships being affected) which could be the direction of further research.

Other research in this area has focused on social media addiction or social media as a form of creating relationships. These past studies help answer use and potential misuse of social media, however there is a scarcity of research about specific social media use, in this case, political and educational topics. Thai students are immersed in education for at least 4 years (most undergraduate students) and have admitted to discussing school events online in a perceived safe environment. The same can be said about politics where there are potentially negative effects from speaking out about concerns about politics, where on a social site like Twitter or Facebook, true identities can be hidden and therefore things can be said, and opinions can be expressed without as much fear of retaliation. More research needs to be done in each area specifically (education and politics) to gauge how much influence each topic has in Thailand, especially for the future leaders of Thailand.

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